



Sea turtle and stingray
in the waters off Akumal

PICTURE: Ocean Tours

Playa for keeps

A relaunched flight route means the white shores and cool caves of Cancun are within easier reach, writes **Ben Ireland**

bobbing my head in and out of an underground freshwater pool in Mexico's Riviera Maya, I'm drifting, awestruck by both stalagmites and stalactites. I ponder which is which, entranced by these eerie but beautiful formations of solidified limestone and calcium-rich water, formed over tens of thousands of years. A beam of sunlight illuminates the cave in a single underwater spot, offering a sense of the sublime.

It's easy to see why the 10,000-plus cenotes dotted across the Yucatán Peninsula hold such spiritual significance for the Maya people, who use them for drinking water, agriculture and religious rituals.

And thanks to Virgin Atlantic's new service from Heathrow to nearby Cancun, even more British travellers can now experience this marvel of nature for themselves.

WATERING HOLES

We set about exploring the Cancun area by water with local operator Ocean Tours, which combines cenote swimming with snorkelling alongside turtles in a half-day tour. First comes Akumal Bay, a known turtle-spotting site due to the abundance of seagrass they feed on. Taken out on a small boat, we jump into the warm water and duck our heads below the surface to see an array of

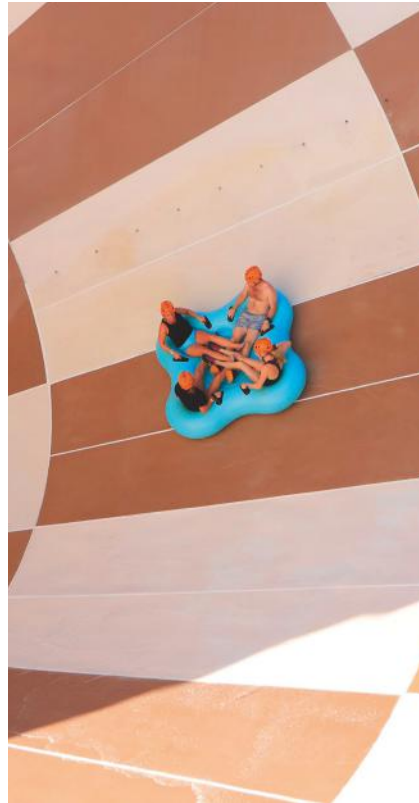
wildlife, including catfish, squid and stingrays, on our way to meet the turtles.

As we float along in our lifejackets, we see the endangered green turtles and their white turtle cousins nibbling at the seagrass and swimming within inches of

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us as they come up for air. They don't seem bothered by their human visitors, who are asked not to touch the reptiles and to keep a respectful distance.

Next, it is on to the Sistema Sac Actun – a subterranean cave network which, at 229 miles, is the world's longest underground river. We visit the Yax-Muul cenote, where the water is unbelievably clear, so much so that visitors are asked not to use sun cream, to protect the delicate ecosystem. It's not a problem given it is mostly hidden from the fierce Mexican sun – a cool, restorative experience on a 30C day. We ➤



PICTURES: Xplor, Ocean Tours

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bats in Sistema Sac Actun; Xplor Park's Toboganzote; a cenote

also spot some bats in their natural habitat, which adds to the experience as they fly over our heads chirping away.

Cenote swimming will appeal to clients ranging from thrill-seekers, who can navigate intricate gaps where the stalactites drop down just above the water, to less confident swimmers, who can stick to the open cavern with its impressive views of the spiky scenery.

PARKS AND RIDE

The cenotes are such a beloved local feature that a water park has been built among them. I am struck by how tastefully Xplor Park – part of the wider Xcaret theme park (commissionable tickets available through Attraction World from £109 per person) – blends into the landscape. Even the gift shop is housed in a long and winding cave.

The park is home to two zipline circuits with seven lines in each. Clients can soar 18 metres above the treetops for a bird's-eye view of Cozumel island, before swooping down into the rivers to finish with a refreshing splash. For a more relaxed option, the hammock slide lets visitors sit in a woven hammock and enjoy a slower-paced zipline journey into a pool.

At the opposite end of the scale, adrenaline seekers can test their nerve with a run down Toboganzote, a 41-metre slide that takes an inflatable raft holding up to four people through a series of tight bends and steep

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drops, up a giant halfpipe and down a huge plughole. It's not for the faint of heart, but our group is in fits of laughter (and screams) on the way down.

Xplor also features a three-mile self-drive amphibious vehicle track, a rafting experience where guests paddle through water illuminated from below, plus an underground expedition that involves wading through a series of large cenotes with – you guessed it – seemingly endless views of those amazing stalactites. **TW**

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic began direct flights from Heathrow to Cancun on October 19, running three times per week on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The exclusive route offers onward connections to other destinations in Mexico, South America and the US through partner airlines Aéromexico, Delta Air Lines and Latam Airlines. Return economy fares start at £574. vaflightstore.com



The Fives Beach Hotel

A 45-minute transfer from Cancun airport, the property aims to tingle all five of its guests' senses, not least with its ceremonies in a traditional Maya *temazcal* or 'sweat lodge'. The family-friendly resort has 662 suites in one, two and three-bedroom layouts, kids' and teens' clubs and a children's spa suite. All-inclusive à la carte dining is spread across 14 restaurants – from Tuscan classics at Arezzo and homely Mexican favourites at Cantina 1910 to the Natura Day Club and Grill, which showcases the scents and sounds of the jungle. Facilities include eight swimming pools, three swim-up bars, three speciality bars, a spa, fitness centre and a running circuit. A night's all-inclusive starts at £79 per person. thefiveshotels.com

TRS Yucatan Hotel

Luxury meets nature at this adult-only all-inclusive hotel, which has a stunning infinity pool overlooking the Caribbean Sea. It's part of the Grand Palladium Hotels & Resorts complex, so guests enjoy access to 35 restaurants and bars. Ten bars and five à la carte restaurants, including Italian, French and Argentine options, are exclusive to TRS Yucatan. The Ibiza-inspired Helios Beach Club offers an impressive buffet, with dishes including lobster. Its 454 suites are integrated into the landscape, along with three pools reserved for TRS guests and a private beach. A night's all-inclusive in a Junior Poolside Suite starts at £104 per person. palladiumhotelgroup.com